

Tips for Healthy Collaborations

In many ways, a long-term collaboration is not unlike a marriage. Collaborations, like marriages, require careful maintenance and occasional compromises to keep collaboration members fulfilled and goals relevant over time. With intentional efforts to keep your collaboration healthy—like the ones described in this tool—your *union* can remain a force to be reckoned with.

- **Don't just guess what your partners want—ask!** Set aside time throughout the year to check in with members to find out how things are going. Find out if participation in the collaboration is meeting their expectations or if there are specific responsibilities they'd like to assume. Seeking input not only demonstrates that member satisfaction is important to you, but that their input is valued. And most importantly, soliciting regular input will generate the information you need to make your collaboration stronger.
- **Keep partners “fed.”** While providing snacks at meetings is a great way to keep partners coming back, it's also vital to figuratively feed them, as well. How can you help them grow? Build connections? Provide opportunities for information sharing or skill building? If you've built in regular check-ins, demonstrate that you are listening by responding to what you hear.
- **Revisit goals and activities.** Ask yourself (and the team): Are we spending our time in ways that will get us where we want to go? As time goes on, members may become sidetracked or engaged in activities that are interesting but not necessarily aligned with the group's mission or goals. It's helpful to schedule time every few months to review project goals, see how members are spending their time, and make sure the two are aligned. If you've developed a logic model to guide your efforts, consider reviewing it with the group to ensure that everyone is on the same page.
- **Assess membership.** As your collaboration grows and evolves, take a step back and critically assess whether you still have the right people at the table. For example, is the impassioned go-getter you brought on board to launch the initiative still a good match now that your work is underway? Or are there new partners who are better positioned to help you move your work to the next level or sustain your efforts? While you don't want your collaboration to feel like a revolving door, reevaluating your membership every 6-12 months can reenergize your work by adding “fresh blood”—or rather, enthusiastic new partners—to the mix.

- **Let partners know what's going on.** Most people who spend their time engaged in prevention work—particularly those who *volunteer* their time—are invested in what they're doing. They care about the products of their labor and want to know the time they are dedicating is well-spent. In other words, they want to be kept in the loop. There are many ways to do this: formally, by establishing a group email list, sharing meeting minutes, and regularly communicating key decisions, and less formally, by inviting members to share updates when something new or exciting has transpired.
- **Celebrate success.** By definition, prevention is the absence of something going on. Reductions in problem behaviors and related consequences can take years to see. For this reason, it's important to recognize and celebrate all of the smaller successes your collaboration achieves along the way. But in order to celebrate success, you first need to define what success looks like for your group. Consider adding this question to your group's annual planning meetings, and then make sure to celebrate when you hit certain milestones.